

**Testimony of Teresa Ferraro
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**Appropriations Committee Public Hearing on:
House Bill 5037 AAC the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30th, 2023
Conservation & Development - February 16, 2022**

Good evening, Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Teresa Ferraro and I work at The Connection. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the state budget.

The Connection is a statewide human services agency that provides solutions to the problems of homelessness, mental illness, substance use, and community justice rehabilitation. Our mission is to build safe, healthy, caring communities and to inspire people to achieve their full potential as productive and valued citizens. We are fortunate to operate the Eddy Shelter of Middlesex County, that provides emergency shelter to homeless (30-40) men and women over the age of 18 and (4) young adults between the age of 18-23; Unlike many other Emergency Shelters in the state, Eddy Shelter remained open with normal census or at least 75% capacity throughout the Pandemic.

I want to thank you for the 4% Cost of Living Adjustment for community nonprofits that you fought to include in last year's budget. I'm here tonight to ask you to honor the long-term plan to address underfunding of community nonprofits and increase funding this year by an additional 8%.

This funding is needed now more than ever. Without it, we risk destabilizing our state's community service delivery system which has been upended by the pressures of COVID-19 and an exponential increase in the need for service in our communities.

At the same time, we're facing unprecedented challenges recruiting and retaining staff of all skill levels and salaries.

The Eddy Shelter staff are front line, essential workers who often act as first responders. People seeking shelter have experienced significant trauma and are in crisis. Residual effects of COVID 19 have exacerbated the stressors of this population, their needs have changed indefinitely, and providers must respond accordingly. We need skilled employees to be able to provide high quality services, keep our communities safe, and work to reduce the number of homeless individuals living on the streets.

Human services are now in competition with companies like Amazon and Walmart that require no specialized training, are paying more and offering more hiring incentives. The Alliance found that 18%, nearly 1 in 5, nonprofit jobs are vacant right now.

Over the last two year, we have experienced consistent turnover and have worked continuously to recruit and retain employees who can grow with our agency. Persistent staff vacancies have caused disruption to quality services and have put a strain on our staff who fill need to fill in the gaps. We are all required to do more with less and we have not been able to provide merit salary increases. It has been difficult to hire and retain staff in this environment with the

compensation available. Our funding from the Department of Housing has been flat for many years, while the needs of the people we serve have increased significantly. We, as have many providers, continue to be impacted by the Opioid epidemic. Our staff are responsible for using Narcan to save lives on a regular basis. This creates a unique challenge because The Shetler can only afford single staff single staff coverage; so while staff is acting as a first responder, that same person is also responsible for the safety and welfare of the remaining clients.

The increase in this year's budget, while very much appreciated, has quickly been absorbed by rising costs. Over the last year, inflation rose by almost six percent, surpassing the COLA in the current year's budget.

The cost of running the Eddy Shelter relies on multiple funding sources. The funding that we receive from DOH does not even cover staff salaries with a bare bones schedule. Our shelter is single staffed on 2nd and 3rd shift, with one employee responding to typical and emergency needs of anywhere between 25-40 individuals. We are expected to fundraise to ensure that client needs are met, and appropriate staffing is available. We must be able to provide our staff with a livable & competitive wage, which would support employee retention. Additional funding would allow us to hire additional direct care staff, which will increase our ability to provide specialized care to a vulnerable population with significant behavioral health needs, housing-focused case management services and improve the flow of exit from the shelter to permanent housing.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony this evening. Please increase funding for community nonprofits by at least eight percent.